

Democratic reforms must begin with political parties

In conversation with Rounaq Jahan, an eminent political scientist, author, and distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).



Rounaq Jahan

The Daily Star (TDS): What are the critical areas where reforms should begin in Bangladesh's political sphere to promote democracy?

Rounaq Jahan (RJ): To promote democracy, we must first democratise our political parties. Parties play a central role in the proper functioning of representative democracy. They recruit and socialise people in political activities. They select and train people for elected positions and offices. They generate political values through propagation of their ideologies. They mobilise voters, structure voting choices, and run election campaigns. We cannot institutionalise democracy unless we have political parties who are truly committed to practising democracy.

Our political parties have played contradictory roles in promoting democracy. Their glorious role in our nationalist struggle in the 1950s and 1960s and in all our pro-democracy movements from the 1950s till the present is undeniable. In contrast, when our political parties were elected to govern the country, they failed to behave in a democratic manner. They have suppressed political opposition, limited citizens' rights, abused state power to perpetuate their own regimes, and eroded the independence of all state and non-state institutions.

But we have to remember that no matter how critical we are of them, we need political parties. They are the essential actors who mediate and aggregate the diverse political interests in the country. They are close to the people on the ground. They lead protests, manage election campaigns, and are the driving force behind elected governments. We cannot move forward in our democratic journey unless it is led by political leaders and parties who are skilled and farsighted enough to navigate the perilous transition process that lies ahead.

At present, our political leaders and parties face the challenge of regaining people's trust in their democratic credentials. They need to demonstrate that they can initiate meaningful reforms to democratise their own organisations. We all recognise that external prescriptions of reforms, unless owned by the parties themselves, will have limited impact. Governments and civil society organisations can exert pressure from outside, but meaningful reforms will take place only

candidate nomination, policy-setting, representation of social diversity, party funding, and conflict resolution, my study showed that none of our political parties practise democracy within their own organisations.

Improving internal democracy will not be an easy task. Undemocratic practices have now become almost normal. But parties can begin this process by first following their own organisational rules. For example, rules of most parties state that there should be regular council meetings and elections for various party positions from grassroots and up; but none of these rules are followed by our political parties. For over forty years, our two major electoral parties have been led by dynastic leaders who have been repeatedly "elected" uncontested. The office bearers of various committees and candidates for elected offices have also been selected by top party leadership. There is little policy deliberation and debate within party forums. Party workers are used to mobilise votes, celebrate commemorative days, and establish authority in different areas by show of physical force. Key party decisions have been taken by top party leaders, sometimes against the advice of other party leaders.

These undemocratic practices now need to change. The party leaders should begin implementing their own organisational rules. They can start the process by electing leaders of all committees at all strata through regular secret ballot, nominating party candidates for elective office from panels selected by grassroots committees, and involving party workers in policy discussion and debates. These actions are relatively straightforward, simple, and would be a step forward.

However, we do have some deeply entrenched undemocratic practices that would be more difficult to dismantle. For example, our major parties have been built through abuse of state resources. When in power, political parties have used state agencies and state resources to reward their supporters and punish their opponents. The mission of capturing and retaining state power at all costs has become an obsession with the major electoral parties for their own survival.

The competition for grabbing public resources has led to corruption and

that obstructs progress towards intra-party democracy.

TDS: What kind of political culture is necessary to sustain a truly democratic environment in Bangladesh?

RJ: The cornerstone of political culture in a democracy is tolerance towards dissenting voices. In a democracy, there will be discussion and debates, competition for power, winners and losers, but all of these contestations must be peaceful and follow democratic rules of the game. A winner in a democratic election cannot behave in the style of "winner takes it all". She/he cannot abuse power to eliminate the loser. Electoral democracy means peaceful transfer of power, rotation of power, and the rule of the majority with the consent of the minority.

In a democratic environment, people should be free to express their opinion without feeling threatened that they will

transition unless we can restore people's trust in these two institutions.

To truly foster democracy, we must restore trust in elections, guarantee judicial independence, and ensure freedom of expression. If we achieve these fundamental goals, we will go a long way in realising *rastra-sanskar*, which is currently being debated.

TDS: How can a national consensus be built to encourage political parties to adhere to democratic values and practices?

RJ: National consensus cannot be built overnight. It will take time, commitment, and hard work on the part of all stakeholders. Unfortunately, in the last fifty-four years, we have seen repeated breakdowns of our democratic order. We have taken a few steps forward and then many steps backwards. Moving forward, we need to be more vigilant against taking any backward step. As soon as we identify any



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

be punished by either the state or non-state actors. Hate-mongering, 'othering', branding, tagging, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and mob violence are all detrimental to sustaining a democratic space in any country.

TDS: How can institutional support, beyond political parties, contribute to a stable and effective democratic political system?

RJ: Political parties are undoubtedly key political institutions, but several other critical institutions also play a pivotal role. For example, we need strong and independent state institutions to work as effective check and balance mechanisms. These include Parliament, the judiciary, the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Human Rights Commission, and other constitutional commissions.

One of the persistent challenges we have faced in the past is that whenever a party came to power, it has attempted to politicise and control all state institutions. This led to the ascendance of an all-powerful and unaccountable head of government. We can establish the rule of law only when all state institutions can function independently, following their own rules.

It is a matter of concern that even in our neighbouring countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, people have trust in the integrity of the electoral process and the Election Commission. In these countries, the higher judiciary has sometimes given judgements against the actions of the regime in power. Sadly, in Bangladesh, citizens have lost trust in the integrity of these state institutions.

To build a democratic system, side by side with state institutions, we also need strong and independent non-state institutions such as trade unions, peasant organisations, student organisations, professional organisations, and civil society organisations. These organisations will generate their own group demands. Political parties can then mediate these collective demands and formulate their own policies and programmes.

Independent media is another critical actor that can hold both state and non-state actors accountable. However, at present, our immediate priority is restoring the integrity of elections and trust in the independence of the judiciary. We cannot expect to have a peaceful democratic

violation of democratic norms and rules, we need to protest and take corrective action to get back on the democratic path.

A major stumbling block in our path towards achieving national consensus is the prioritisation of debates about identity, history, and culture by political parties. If parties prioritise discussions on economic and social development policies, it will be easier to reach consensus on important issues facing the nation. Culture wars will only intensify divisions, as we are now witnessing in the USA.

TDS: What measures can be taken to safeguard against a return to autocracy?

RJ: I am reminded of Lord Acton's famous quote: "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty". Vigilant citizens who are committed to maintaining a democratic system are the best safeguards against a return to autocracy. Of course, citizens need to be empowered through the protection of their fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression. They need to be guaranteed their minimal democratic rights, such as regular free and fair elections to elect parties/people in and out of power and get fair justice from an independent judicial system.

As I noted earlier, we need to build democratic state and non-state institutions to safeguard individual freedoms and protect against a return to autocracy. But institution-building needs time, and practices are more important than formal laws and rules. By simply amending or rewriting a constitution or proclaiming a law or ordinance, we will not be able to safeguard against a return to autocracy. Our values, norms, and above all, our practices need to be more democratic. This will take time; we need to be patient and stay on the democratic course. We need to engage in civil dialogues with people who hold opposing views and not resort to threats or actual violence to eliminate them.

We will make mistakes, but we can take corrective measures only when we keep an open mind and are willing to listen to criticisms. Those of us who are concerned about democracy have a responsibility to act whenever processes seem to be heading in the wrong direction. This requires criticism grounded in freedom of expression and ensuring accountability through strong institutions.

This interview was taken by Priyam Paul.

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I hope after the July 2024 student-led mass uprising, our political leaders have woken up to new ground realities that the people are no longer willing to accept the autocratic and oppressive behaviour of the parties. They need to show now that they follow universally accepted democratic norms within their organisations as well as when they relate to other parties and citizens.

TDS: How can internal democracy within political parties be improved, and what role does it play in the broader democratic system?

RJ: Internal democracy within political parties is key to democracy promotion and consolidation. The arguments are relatively straightforward: that parties must practise what they preach; that if a party is run in an autocratic manner and it is not inclusive, it can hardly be expected to nurture democratic values outside.

Almost ten years ago, I published a book, *Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization* (Prothoma, 2015), where I elaborated on some of the undemocratic practices of our political parties. By using several indicators which have been used in other global studies, such as the processes of leadership selection,

criminalisation of party politics. Business people and maastans have emerged as dominant players. Factions within parties have multiplied due to increasing contestation for a share of the spoils. The factional feuds have led to increasing political violence between and within parties. Interestingly, more people are getting killed due to intra-party violence. For example, according to Ain-O-Salish Kendra, between 2002 to 2023, intra-party violence has led to 447 deaths as opposed to 266 deaths due to violence between parties. It is also worth noting that the incidence of intra-party violence is higher within ruling parties, which implies that they have more patronage resources to distribute.

Factional feuds have also strengthened the position of dynastic leaders, who have become indispensable for holding together the various feuding groups and factions within the parties.

Factionalism within parties is common worldwide, but in most cases, conflicts are resolved through democratic processes, such as secret balloting, to select leaders without external interference. Unfortunately, in our political system, decisions are often dictated by supreme dynastic leaders. Without their involvement, no one listens to one another, perpetuating an autocratic political culture